For Dear Life

By Izola Forrester

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ILLUSTRATED BY MAYO BUNKER

THE hospital at Axaculpo stood just at your right as you came down from the construction tents.

There was little variety or charm in the outlook from its windows, Dorothy Pierson thought, those first two months of her stay there as head nurse. Northward stretched a treeless monotony of rolling hills. Southward the river flowed along over its bed of yellow sand, so shallow that when the sunlight shone full upon it, it looked like some great, mottled snake.

It took courage to stand the first two months, even with Doctor Billie's unflagging good humor and example before one. The only other women were some of the foremen's wives, and little O'Brien, the night nurse. Dorothy doubled on day duty and had full charge of the operating room. It was hard work, but she welcomed it, and told herself that she was forgetting—forgetting Denver and Stanley and all the trouble she had faced there.

She had never blamed Stanley because her father had lost his fortune dabbling around in Stanley's father's mining schemes; that was part of the man's game. And she had acted without impulse in breaking their engagement. It had been only fair to Stanley and his people. She believed, looking back, that she had told him he knew nothing of life's real battle, that every step of his life had been made happy and easy for him.

"And it isn't good for a boy, Stan," she had said, standing with her back to the big west window that looked toward the mountains.

Stanley had tried to follow her, but the sunset light behind her had persisted in casting a penumbra of gold around her, catching the high lights in her hair, and throwing a curious radiance over her. It had been hard to keep his mind on what she was saying, when his whole heart had ached to take her in his arms and hold her, even against her will.

"You go in for athletics," she had gone on, "but you let the muscles of your mind and will get flabby. Suppose it had been your father and not mine who lost on the Axaculpo deal. What would you do for a living?"

"What are you going to do?" Stanley had asked.

"I'm going to be a trained nurse at last. Father and every one laughed at me when I took the course at Chicago. I did it then because I loved the work, but now it'll mean bread and butter for me."

"Why won't you marry me?"

"For two reasons, Stan—you can't

take care of me with your own money because you haven't any, nothing but what your father gives you, and I think —I think every dollar of that is cursed after the trouble at Axaculpo.'

"It's all cleared up now, isn't it?"

"Cleared up? The conditions down there are awful. There are hundreds of men and some women, too, and one lone hospital shack, and one doctor. I'm going down to help him out. Don't say anything, Stan," she added passionately. "I want to go. I want to feel I am working against your father down there. Every time any one is brought in with life at a premium, I shall fight to save it from the company's clutch."

"Who told you about it?"

Dorothy had hesitated, biting her lip in the way she had when she was puzzled.

"I met the company doctor when he was up here. He's Natica Reynolds' cousin, Billie Kellogg. He came up to try and get more money for the operating room. He says it isn't fit to cut up pet dogs in, let alone human beings. And your father wouldn't give him an extra cent."

"Maybe he didn't understand," Stanley had said heavily. "The governor's queer. He makes me keep out of it. Says there's time enough when he dies and hands it over."

"Isn't that just like him?" Dorothy had returned hotly. "Never to give you half a chance to find out about anything, and then, some day, to let it fall into your hands to manage! Oh, don't talk to me about it, Stan! I only get all cross and hopeless. I want to go right down there and work with Doctor Billie."

She had left Denver the following week, without letting him know. Stanley had heard the news at the company's offices. Tucker, the treasurer, had asked him if he had heard of her going, and Stanley had nodded and strolled down to where the head of the company sat in his private office.

Nobody knew what had taken place between the old man and his boy. When Stanley had come out, he had stopped at the cashier's window and thrown down his check book.

"What's up?" Quinn, the thin, young cashier, had sized him up anxiously. Everybody liked "the young hope," as they dubbed him. "Don't be impetuous, Stan. We'd all be throwing up our jobs if we let the old man dazzle us."

"I'm going in for athletics," Stanley had answered cheerfully. "I'm not working for the firm as dad's understudy any longer. Good-by!"

All of which had failed to reach Axaculpo, it being somewhat off the main line of travel. The new nurse received no letters from Denver, and Doctor Billie noted, with much pleasure, her deepening color, and her general resistance to the little tricks of climate at this border camp.

"The trend of progress may set our way any day," he told her one morning, when the early sunrise had edged the hill ridge with gold and russet and rarest purple. "A hundred and fifty men came down to put through the new line of track yesterday. Water's good, and no fever case yet. Food and general sanitation pretty bad. Have you been through the tents?"

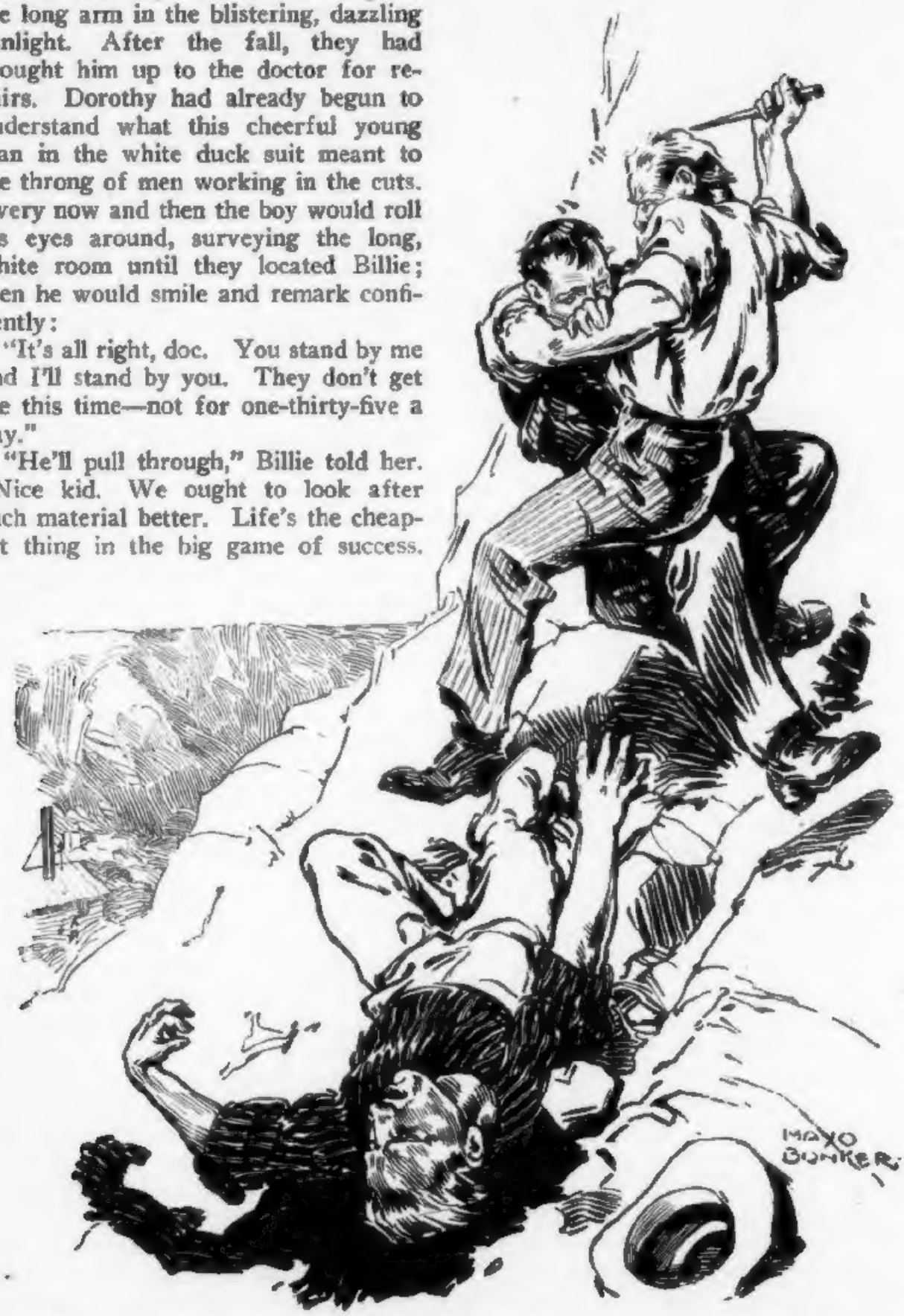
Dorothy shook her head. She was watching Kiko, the Jap helper, as he sunned himself in the doorway, eyes half closed, like a lizard's. He had been brought up from Dongan's outfit, half a mile down the river, where the first bridge was to be. The doctor had mended up his smashed ribs and kept him on hand. He was more good to the company at the hospital than mixing concrete and getting into scraps with Dongan's crowd.

Halfway down the room, a boy from Texas was singing drowsily. Something had gone wrong on one of the big

cranes, and they had sent him up on the long arm in the blistering, dazzling sunlight. After the fall, they had brought him up to the doctor for repairs. Dorothy had already begun to understand what this cheerful young man in the white duck suit meant to the throng of men working in the cuts. Every now and then the boy would roll his eyes around, surveying the long, white room until they located Billie; then he would smile and remark confidently:

"It's all right, doc. You stand by me and I'll stand by you. They don't get me this time—not for one-thirty-five a day."

"He'll pull through," Billie told her. "Nice kid. We ought to look after such material better. Life's the cheapest thing in the big game of success.



"He fights one and starts him rolling down the slant, and when he reaches for his mate, he gets about a dozen thrusts from the husky's knife."

There's another youngster Cragin's working into shape. He has his own methods with what he calls the soft metal."

Dorothy nodded. She was thinking of Stanley, that other youngster back at Denver who needed working into shape. Almost she felt tempted to tell Doctor Billie about him. And then she looked up and saw an expression in Billie's brown eyes that made her change her mind. She was trying to be very tactful and impersonal with her hospital superior.

Life had somehow turned into a wonderful thing, a gift of daily happiness, to Billie, during those two months, after the powers at the main office had granted him a real nurse instead of a couple of Mexican boys to cook and scrub floors.

He had not specified exactly the type of nurse—merely that she must be capable and moderately humanized, and must understand English. He had not expected an angel—this girl with her fluffy, gold-colored hair in soft waves under her white cap, and her glorious, wide, dark eyes and cool, slim, sympathetic hands. The boy from Texas had insisted on kissing them just as she had been ready to give him the anæsthetic. Billie didn't blame him at all. It was a new way of avoiding shock in major operations.

"You don't find it lonesome down here, do you?" asked Billie a bit awkwardly. "It's different with me. I'm going to stick it out until the old man makes good."

"You mean Mr. Fenton?"

He nodded his head, his eyes half closed behind their rimless glasses, and just to make sure his hair was standing on end, as usual, he ran his fingers through it. Somehow, Dorothy always thought he managed to catch the half-startled, tousled look of a sleepy boy.

"He's got to realize the fight we have to put up here on little cash, with over three hundred men to keep in health, his working atoms. There comes another of them."

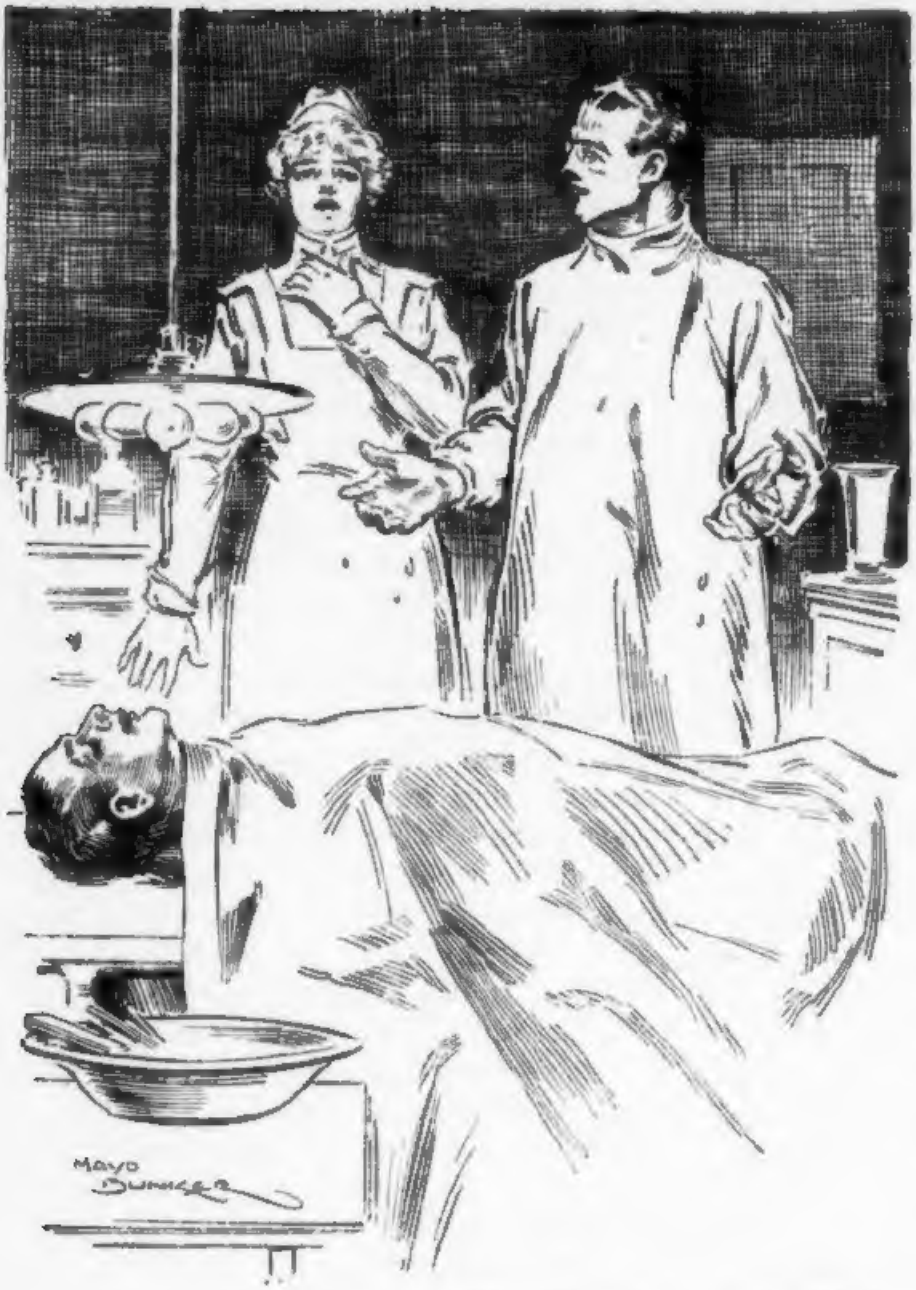
He stood up, and Dorothy followed his gaze. They were bringing somebody up from Cragin's division of the cut. It was a common sight—the narrow hospital stretcher and its load—but Billie felt a curious, nonprofessional tingle of interest and regret, too, as he stood beside the long-limbed, athletic youngster who lay on it this time. The nurse had gone inside.

"He's been down about two weeks," Cragin told him in a lowered tone. "It's the old man's boy, doc. He wanted to get at the real thing, you understand, and I took him on. He's worked in with the boys day after day, and did his bit with the rest until that pack of Polacks and huskies ran down on me yesterday. When they saw the food and bunks, they started to fight, first off this morning, and I had to lay a few out. Then, after the twelve whistle sounds, if two of them don't edge off to the magazine shanty, and get out some dynamite to blow us all up. And Stan, here, sees 'em, and goes after 'em. They started to climb the rocks over the cut to throw it down on us—near two hundred men down there in that cut like a lot of ants. And he got them, all right. Fights one and starts him rolling down the slant, and when he reaches for his mate, he gets about a dozen thrusts from the husky's knife. So there he is for you, doc."

"Wire the old man," said Billie.

They carried Stanley into the operating room a few minutes later, Cragin and the Jap helper. Dorothy was there already, preparing things in her quick, silent way, and Billie did not look at her as he scrubbed his hands at the enameled basin in the corner.

"You see," he said cheerfully, "the main thing to avoid in cases like this is shock. He's a good, husky specimen, isn't he, Miss Pierson? Ought to pull



"I suppose you know it's up to us to save him."

through all right. It certainly gives me a neat turn on the old man, having his only pride and joy on that table, after I've been dunning him for six months for a new one. Funny Stanley'd drop down on these diggings incog, and start working out his own salvation on the day shift with Cragin! You knew him, didn't you?"

And then he flushed rather boyishly, remembering that while he had been an interne, bumping over side streets on an ambulance, Dorothy had been a débutante with his cousin's, Natica Reynolds', set. He had heard from her how easy-going Phil Pierson had dropped a fortune in some of the Fenton speculations. But some way he had never connected Dorothy with the society crowd, as he dubbed them all in his own mind. She had seemed, from the beginning, one of his kind, some one who felt the big, human heart throb in the cadence and rhythm of life's symphony.

He glanced over at her, hoping he had not, with his usual luck, hit on any tender point, but Dorothy hardly heard him. She had been laying out sponges methodically for the most important case the little hospital had ever known, when she had caught the import of his words, and had turned about to look at the face under the circular cluster of electric bulbs over the operating table.

"What's up?" asked Billie, seeing her lean back against the wall, her dark eyes wide with sudden fear. He had never seen such a look in them, nor the whitening around her lips.

"Nothing, nothing at all. I'm all right."

"I see." He took his hands out of the bichloride solution leisurely, and came toward her, with elbows resting on his hips and palms upraised, looking like a devotee of some new cult in his long linen gown. His brown eyes were

narrowed and full of kindliness and something else, something that was a challenge to Dorothy's professional instinct. "I suppose you know it's up to us to save him. And, if we can, it may mean locating the human spot in old Dun Fenton's heart, so he'll learn how men suffer. Don't think of yourself, if you can help it——"

He stopped short. The eyes of the man on the table opened and stared up at the shining, unlighted circle of bulbs curiously. Then they found Dorothy's face, and their owner tried to rise up on his elbow.

"Steady, old man!" Billie said, as the other dropped back, with clenched teeth and bewildered eyes. "You're dry-docked. Now, Miss Pierson, please."

But before she gave the anæsthetic, before Billie could even guess her intention, she bent over and kissed the tense, blanched young face. Billie smiled, watching her go ahead with the administration, her hands perfectly steady, those cool, firm hands he had always admired.

"If there's a ghost of a chance, he's got it," he told her. "Keep your head, now, and let's pray the ether doesn't give out. I've been wiring for supplies for four days, now. Maybe the old man will listen to me after this."

Slowly the minutes passed. Dorothy stood at the head of the table, holding the cone, watching Kiko as he passed silently to and fro, obeying the doctor's low words and nods. Stanley talked intermittently, now with drowsy pleading, now in vehement protest. Sometimes it was to her, then to his father, but he managed to convey the whole story to Billie, working along unmoved and keen-eyed.

Suddenly Kiko stopped before the screened window. Very gently he spoke, so as not to jar unduly the quiet of the room:

"Cragin's men coming. Most unexpectedly gone crazy, I suggest, honorable doctor."

From the yellow, sunbaked wagon road leading to the cut came a dull, strange, murmuring uproar, the mingled voices of Polacks, Huns, Italians, Cragin's hundred and fifty substitutes, shipped down from Colorado to help Old Man Fenton punch one of his lines of track through a new part of the New Mexico desert land.

Billie glanced up from the particular section of Fenton spine he was working on. It had been some task to determine the result of each particular knife thrust planted in the youngster's anatomy, to play delicately with sutures, and defraud the angel of the darker drink of one new drainer of the cup. He felt a wave of annoyance at the interruption.

From where he stood, beside the table, he could see the swarm of men running like insects over the ground, some in the roadway, some clambering out of the cut, some hanging to the skeleton bridge structure farther down, like apes. They all had weapons in their big, knotted hands—sticks, bars of iron and steel, anything they could pick up in their charge against the cluster of buildings near the big water tank—the hospital, the company office, and the handful of rough board shacks used for sleeping quarters.

There came a knock at the door, and Cragin's voice:

"Doc, let me in, for God's sake!"

"Can't!" Billie called back. "Sit still, please, Miss Pierson. Go tell Mr. Cragin to turn the hose on them, Kiko." He smiled quizzically. "Wonder how much water there is in the tank. Bring me back my revolver when you come, boy."

"How much longer?" asked Dorothy, the first words she had spoken since they started. "I haven't any more to give him."

Outside, came the hiss of the hose as Kiko manipulated it on the first comers,

and the crack of rifles from the two windows of the office shack. Billie shook his head.

"Too soon to shoot," he said. "Cragin and the rest are nervous. I'm almost done. You stay here. See that he comes out all right. Heart action's bully!"

Steadily he worked along until the whole thing was finished, each wound cleansed, each severed artery picked up and joined, everything neat and as it should be. He smiled at Dorothy.

"Not so bad, eh? The one in his back's the worst."

"Will he live?" It was said so low he could hardly catch it as she bent over Stanley.

"Sure he'll live!" Billie replied sturdily.

Then he stepped out into the long, hot room with its rows of beds. The boy from Texas was at a side window with a revolver in his good hand, his parched lips drawn back in a happy grin, one eye closed as he aimed at the dogged, stumbling, half-naked crowd.

"Don't do it!" Billie pleaded. "Use the hose. You'll choke the place up with half-killed fellows for me to take care of, and I just used the last ether. Don't do it, there's a good chap!"

He made for the door. Kiko stood on the steps with the hose playing on the nearest line of men, and Cragin was shouting at them in his richest, most unrestrained Limerick.

"Wait! I'll talk to them. What do they want?" Billie asked.

Kiko shook the end of the hose. It was limp all at once, a dripping, ineffectual weapon of defense.

"Nobody anxiously desire to take time and ask, doctor. Also, no immediate water in tank."

Standing on the steps, Billie eyed the horde below, jamming, scowling, silent atoms in Dunstan Fenton's scheme of success. Axaculpo lay nineteen miles across the State line from Kelvin, the nearest civilized town. It would take hours to get help. Cragin turned long enough to fling back the news that he had sent word farther down the cut to Dongan and the other foremen to arm their men and send them up to beat back the new men, before they set fire to the hospital and office buildings.

"If we can keep them busy long enough, Dongan'll be here, doc. Get at them, can't you?"

Standing there in the hot glare of sunlight, the doctor made a startling picture. To the waiting men, he seemed a priest or brother of some strange order they did not know, in his long white hospital garb.

Flinging up one hand high in the air, palm outstretched toward them, as if in blessing, he called out in a voice that had rallied many a plunging, breaking line after a recreant pigskin back in his college days:

"Who speaks English? What do you want?"

"I speak, padre." A tawny little half-breed Mexican from the border hills shouldered his way out of the mob. "Boss he ess no good, you un'stan'? He give no to eat for men, no place for sleep for men, no good water. Men vera bad seeck, you un'stan'? Die like flies pretty quick. Devil in camp!"

Then, patiently but forcibly, Billie spoke to them as a man and a brother, while Cragin hung around the corner of the building, watching for the first sign of the regular workers, the "seasoned bunch," as he dubbed them, who had been in the cut for months. And they listened to him half understandingly, with the lines of hatred and dogged despair smoothing out of their faces. Even when they did not know what his words meant, they caught the meaning of his tone. And they knew, too, that he was not like the other men with the company. He did not meet them with bullets. He seemed to understand their trouble and need.

The little Mexican interpreted in a queer sort of pidgin English, a garbled patois of cosmopolitan camps. They must not show fight. The water was all right. The food would be better as soon as the supply train came down. There was no danger of any fever or pestilence. Had not the others worked there for months in safety?

So he rambled on, loquacious and soothing. Billie wiped his forehead and raised his head, listening. He was crazy, of course—it was absurd even to imagine such a thing—but he thought he had caught the far-off thrill of a train whistle. He smiled grimly at the trick his overwrought nerves were playing him. It was quite as if the Old Man had really turned human, and sent an answer to his appeal for help, for decent medicine supplies instead of little dabs of this and that, for proper help and hospital equipment, for means to save and garner these human lives dropped down in a forsaken corner of the wilderness to work for him. It was quite as if it had come true.

"Don't do it!" Billy pleaded. "You'll choke the place up with half-killed fellows for me to take care of, and I just used the last ether. Don't do it, there's a good chap!"

He felt the touch of a hand on his arm, and turned his head. It was Dorothy, her eyes shining with a wonderful new light. All the repressed pain was gone from them, all the old challenge at fate's little immutable laws. There were tenderness and faith revealed now in them, and a satisfied love. Billie had seen the same look in women gazing at their first-born.

"He's conscious," she said softly. "He wants to speak to you, doctor."

She had him on a cot in the small supply room, lifted there by O'Brien, the other nurse, and herself. His eyes were open, watching the door with starved intensity. Dorothy went straight to him, and knelt beside him, one arm around his head as it lay on the pillow, and Billie regarded them both impersonally, hearing in his ears the throb-

bing, drumming vibration of that imaginary supply train.

"Has it come yet?" Stanley asked him eagerly.

"Has what come?"

"The special with supplies? I couldn't stand it any longer down here, doc. Yesterday I rode down to Kelvin and wired dad. He isn't so bad, when you know him. I sent him a night letter, and invited him down. He didn't know I was here. I wanted him to get in the middle of the game himself, like you, and see the fight that you and Cragin put up."

So the old man was coming, and that buzz in his ears was real, that long, shrieking whistle outside was real, the supply special was drawing up at Axaculpo, and there would be the new operating table, perhaps—a nice glass one, not this painted iron

Billie smiled slowly. He knew he hadn't the ghost of a winning chance beside this youngster on the cot, and yet he could smile down at him. Surely, the years of civilization and inhibition meant something when he could actually feel grateful to this boy, instead of reaching over and killing him as he lay there, for the sake of the girl who knelt between them. Surely, life was something more than a mere lock step of souls in prison when one could take this splendid, gorgeous emotion called love and lay it to one side as a dream that had passed, just because a hospital supply train had pulled in, and there was to be relief instead of bloodshed.

"The special's just in, old man," he said genially. "Much obliged to you. Better let him sleep, Miss Pierson."

Outside, he heard the sound of cheers down across the track, the single track that had been run out to Axaculpo over the miles of flat, sunbaked land. They were welcoming Dunstan Fenton, the men who had been ready to burn and kill only a short time before. He watched the old fellow come briskly along beside Cragin; and Fenton, looking ahead, saw the short, stocky figure on guard at the hospital door, clad still in the white linen robe. Cragin was telling him of the fight down in the cut, and of Stanley's share in it, telling it with quick, Celtic color and vehemence. As Fenton bounded up the steps and clasped Billie's hand, his face glowed with admiration, and something more, something almost akin to brotherhood, the unseen bond that binds man to man in mutual responsibility.

"If there's anything I can do, Kellogg," he concluded, after his first congratulations, "after I've been in to see my boy——"

Billie smiled.

"I wouldn't go in there just yet," he said. "You see, the main thing to avoid in these operations is shock, and the kid's having our own special treatment."